



The Online Division of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [News](#) at sacbee.com.

Prison factory chief plans a turnaround

By Mareva Brown -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PST Monday, January 24, 2005

Matt Powers could be comfortably retired, making fishing trips to his family's cabin in Alaska and collecting his deputy police chief pension from the city of Sacramento. But that would be out of character for the man close friends endearingly call "Don Quixote."

Instead, Powers is standing amid the din of a dozen license-plate stamping machines at Folsom State Prison's factory, straining to carry on a conversation with two inmates.

The enigmatic former cop is so passionate about his belief in the value of good vocational training for inmates that he's throwing his considerable energy into reforming an icon of California's troubled prison system - its Prison Industry Authority.

As the prison authority's general manager since last summer, Powers inherited a \$162 million industrial venture that employs more than 5,700 inmates in 22 California prisons.

"Matt is energetic and committed," said Department of Corrections Director Jeanne Woodford. "(He) understands public safety must include an opportunity for offenders to change."

His challenge will be to turn around an agency that for more than a decade has been criticized for overpricing its goods and being unresponsive to customers.

The Prison Industry Authority was created in 1982 by legislators who gave it the dual goals of preparing inmates for the work force in hopes of reducing recidivism and helping cut down prison costs.

The PIA also has a list of state agencies that are required to buy its products unless they can demonstrate why they must buy from the private sector.

Initially, the prison authority was hailed as a national model. But by the following decade, it had fallen from glory and since has been the subject of criticism by various oversight agencies.

A 1993 Little Hoover Commission report charged that the PIA was "holding state departments hostage to high prices and delayed deliveries."

Three years later, the Legislative Analyst's Office reported that while the PIA had improved its troubled financial status, it did so "at the expense of other legislative purposes." It urged PIA to set goals of becoming financially self-sufficient and improving inmate employability.

A 1996 state auditor's report said more than half the PIA's goods cost more than they would in the

private sector and took too long to make and deliver.

Since 2000, the agency has labored under a series of interim managers who have tried to satisfy the dual - and conflicting - requirements of running a competitive business while churning as many inmates as possible through job training.

The criticisms have continued. In August, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger unveiled his California Performance Review, he featured a single \$1,620 desk made by PIA prisoners alongside a full set of similarly priced office furniture.

Last month, the state auditor released a new report on the PIA, crediting it with some minor reforms and competitive prices, but faulting it for having no way to measure its own successes and no clear mission.

If anyone can turn the troubled agency around, Powers' supporters say he's the man for the job.

"Matt really has a passion for seeing people who end up in jail or prison as having a lot of human potential," said Tim Brown, executive director of Loaves and Fishes and a former collaborator with Powers on the city-county board on homelessness. "When I heard he was taking on PIA, I thought, 'That's a really great fit.' ... He really sees the capacity for rehabilitation."

Powers is a study in contrasts.

"He wears Birkenstocks and drives a Volvo and he's a cop," said Undersheriff John McGinness, a longtime colleague. "He's not the stereotypical anything."

The grandson of a San Quentin inmate, Powers grew up in a tough, poor San Francisco neighborhood. He talks admiringly of a hand-carved stagecoach model that his grandmother bought from the prison inmates' shop.

But he was determined not to follow the same path. During his 23 years at the Police Department, he was a Special Weapons and Tactics team sergeant and among the first local police officers to earn a master's degree in science in management.

Colleagues teased him for being such a straight arrow.

"He looks like he should be a college professor," said Sacramento Police Chief Albert Nájera, who was one of Powers' first training officers and remains a friend. "But appearances belie Matt; he is one tough individual."

After retiring from the Police Department in 2000, he spent two years at Raley's Inc. as vice president for strategic planning and public affairs. He also teaches emergency services management courses at California State University, Long Beach.

What sets Powers apart from his colleagues most is his earnest, academic approach to solving criminal problems.

In the mid-1990s, Powers led a coalition of police officers, neighborhood activists, and other officials in a concerted effort to rid Alkali Flat of its entrenched gang problem.

He began by researching successful community-oriented policing practices in Boston, a well-received halfway house in Manhattan and the history of Alkali Flat's problem before pulling together his team to make a plan of action.

"He is, in law enforcement, a Renaissance man," said Powers' longtime colleague and friend Steve Harrold,

a prosecutor who oversees the career criminal unit at the Sacramento County District Attorney's Office. "He's very well-read, and a very strategic person."

Over the past several months, Powers has buried himself in research about successful inmate manufacturing programs, touting successes in other states and looking for new markets.

His vision of success for the PIA is to increase the number of inmates he prepares for the work force. To do that, he must grow the business. But first, he must corral his team into writing a strategic plan.

"Matt doesn't need to do this," McGinness said. "He's a pretty popular lecturer. He could make a decent living doing just that. This is a labor of love for him. He's doing it for all the right reasons."

About the writer:

- The Bee's Mareva Brown can be reached at (916) 321-1088 or mbrown@sacbee.com.

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
Phone: (916) 321-1000

[Copyright © The Sacramento Bee](#)